

Sabbath!! – Not while I’m on holiday!

Phil Jump asks whether the exhaustion of the pandemic will result in a return of the sabbath

The irony of the moment was not lost on me as I turned the corner to find that yet another harbourside restaurant was not open for business. Here was I, a recognised Church Leader, becoming increasingly frustrated at the apparent refusal of any local hostelry to open its doors on a Sunday evening. This was the height of the summer season! Are not such places, and the tourists they attract, the mainstay of Cornish fishing villages these days? At least this one offered some explanation as the home-made sign on the door announced that the premises would be closed on Sunday and Monday in order to allow its staff to rest.

As our week’s holiday progressed, I began to recognise this as just one symptom of a pretty widespread staff shortage across the hospitality sector. Already hit by an ongoing recruitment crisis, exacerbated by numerous calls to self-isolate as Covid cases in the South-West were rising, those staff who were left were simply too exhausted and too over-stretched to carry on!

So here was the hospitality sector, unprompted as far as I could tell by any religious intervention, embracing the idea of Sabbath. Businesses were setting aside the obvious opportunities to cash in on the growing throngs of “staycationers” (as those of us who holiday in the UK have now become so irritatingly labelled) preferring instead to protect the wellbeing of their employees. Proprietors seemed to have finally managed to abandon the much mis-used mantra that “the customer is always right” in favour of “the customer will have to do without – my staff need a break!”

Sabbath is of course one of the defining features in the vision of community that is outlined in the early law books of the Old Testament. And Sabbath has a direct and defining impact on our understanding and practice of work. As I reflected on this somewhat obvious manifestation of this ancient Biblical principle, I was reminded of the media storm being generated just a couple of weeks earlier when elite gymnast

Simone Biles had pulled out of most of her Olympic events because “her mind was not in the right place”.

Many of course were quick to condemn, citing the significant privilege and financial investment that she attracted as an elite sports star, or dismissing her mental struggle as a necessary part of the job that needed to be accepted and embraced. But it was those with direct experience of such competition who made the most compelling and supportive case. Speaking on the BBC, former Olympic champion Beth Tweddle spoke of the disorientating impact of the constant twisting, vaulting and somersaulting, asserting that it was nothing less than dangerous to attempt to perform at the level that would have been expected of Biles, without an absolute confidence that her brain was functioning at its best.

Biles’ difficult decision came in the wake of a number of similar stories surrounding Japanese tennis star Naomi Osaka, when she pulled out



Naomi Osaka

Photo: [@naomiosaka](https://twitter.com/naomiosaka)



A Cornish restaurant
Photo: cornwalllive.com

of the French Open after failing to attend a number of compulsory press conferences. There was clearly little regard for the mental and emotional pressure that was imposed by the unquestioned assertion that being an accomplished tennis player generates a right, on the part of the media, to interrogate you at their bidding in the glare of numerous cameras and media streams.

Each of these episodes bear testimony to what I would describe as a renaissance that work seems to have enjoyed as a result of the Covid Pandemic. By that, I mean that we have become re-alerted to the graft and the toil that lies behind many of the outcomes that we have too easily come to take for granted. It began of course with the deserved and welcome recognition of the role of what came to be known as “key workers”, but has more recently found expression through the empty shelves of supermarkets reminding us of the small army of drivers, pickers, packers, and stackers, without whom our supply chains of consumer-ready convenience cannot function. And it says much about our cossetted Western expectations when, in a world where thousands of children live with perpetual malnourishment, we describe as a “food shortage” only having two

brands of baked beans to choose from instead of our usual dozen!

And similar attitudes emerge when our expectation to be consumers of elite sports broadcasts is interrupted by the needs and wellbeing of its performers, or we are denied the ubiquitous smattering of harbourside restaurants so that we can enjoy the view of what, for others, is a necessary and demanding workplace.

Whether we encounter it as a Biblical principle or a workplace necessity, Sabbath reminds us not only of the value of rest but also of the value of work. It invites us to stop and recognise that the outputs and outcomes we perpetually consume come at the expense and through the endeavours of others. And as environmental campaigners are repeatedly reminding us, a Sabbath approach to consumption is not only desperately overdue, but is increasingly becoming a planetary imperative.

The Church is of course asking itself many questions about how we engage and find our place in a post-pandemic world. I sense that one of the features of that world will be a renewed understanding and recognition of the value and place of work. And by work I don’t mean that caricature of work that is defined by economic growth and GDP

- but real work: the hands-on, get it sorted, make it happen stuff that is the real, if often hidden, shared capital of society. Our understanding of Sabbath is the outworking of a broader perception of a creator God who invites us to participate as co-creators in ways that promote and enable human flourishing – and perhaps in the current climate we have the opportunity to make that point with renewed clarity.

I sense that my true frustration that evening was not that I had to go home and make my own dinner, but that business proprietors were needing to re-assert for themselves a principle that people of faith seem to have long since forgotten and abandoned their responsibility to declare.

So do we simply join in with the inevitable chorus of condemnation of political failures that have denied us our consumer expectations, or do we perhaps see those empty shelves and closed restaurants as a prophetic sign of the true reality of human experience? Westerners cannot find enough food to fill the aisles of their supermarkets, while others in the world cannot find enough to fill the stomachs of their children. Some are even warning us that this supply-chain crisis could “ruin Christmas” – or perhaps it might provide the opportunity to rediscover its true message! 



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